

No Limits

I once owned my own bowling ball because I was part of a team in an organized bowling league long enough to require relying on the ball of my choice, rather than on the kindness of the bowling alley. Well, that, and another bowler always snatched my favorite bowling ball from the alley's rack before I would show up for league play. But that's not the story.

I was part of a bowling team made up of a couple of coworkers and their friends. They were a nice enough group that I bowled with them through three bowling seasons, putting up with the smoke-filled and beer laden bowling alley in the Valley. Of course, every bowling alley I have entered has been smoke-filled and beer laden. I don't smoke and I don't drink beer while I bowl. Probably why I don't like curling as a sport. Can't play well in curling without a cigarette dangling from the lips while holding a beer in the non-sliding hand. But that's not the story

Thinking that I was a fairly good bowler, in my first season with the team I found out that I was not. Bowling strikes didn't come easily for me, much less picking up spares of seven pins or more. The former was rare and the latter rarer, still. No one on the team said anything about my consistent mediocracy. I regularly totaled a score well below each of my teammates. It bugged me. A lot.

Following the end of my first league season, during a break between bowling league seasons, I went about correcting my inability to roll the bowling ball where I wanted, when I wanted. Twice a week for the several weeks before the next season started, I took my lunches at the alley, rolling frame after frame. My scores improved a bit but I lacked consistency. I kept at it.

Almost each time I bowled through my lunch, there was a fellow a few lanes away, bowling with the greatest of ease, spinning his shiny, cool-patterned bowling ball down his lane, smashing strike upon strike. I watched him. I noticed his steps, his strike with each step, his lift, his gentle snap of his wrist, followed by his bowling ball hitting the lane with a spinning, tight sweep, sliding down the lane before blowing through the pins concurrent with the bold sound from the pins being smashed into the back of the catch. It was impressive to watch.

I began simulating the spin from the wrist, practiced the spin with the Alley's bowling ball from the rack, and noticed that I could pound a pretty strike. Occasionally. Being a stubborn cuss, I kept at it during lunch. I also found a bowling ball for sale that was the right weight, a good color, and felt right. I paid for the ball, the finger holes, the ball bag, the wiping rag, and asserted myself deeper into my practice.

The next league season started. The team gave me a welcome hello. I produced the ball from my bag, placing it onto the lane's rack, and waited my turn. Standing my practiced distance from the line, drying my hand over the rack's fan, I began my approach, finally snapping the ball from my wrist. It rolled quickly and with purpose down the lane, into the gutter. I made a face and turned back to the rack. I got a few suggestions to shake it off. I gathered my bowling ball, stepped to my line, strode the practiced steps, snapped the ball off my wrist, watched it roll aggressively down the lane into the pins. All ten dropped. I earned a spare. My next three rolls were each strikes.

From then on, I expected a strike with every roll and a score above 200 with every game. That didn't happen. I became that guy: acting cool when I did roll a strike, even cooler when I salvaged a spare, and sullenly irritable when I failed at either. My reactions were no different than those of my teammates, but I'd become part of the teasing, making me a better part of the team.

From then on, I was known as being a consistent, steady bowler, not great but not bad. If we needed me to bowl a high score to win the night, I would usually come through, or, be close enough that our loss was not weighted on me. That was good enough for me. We actually were good enough that second season to make the playoffs. That third season we played into the semifinals. That's the story.

Then I moved, changing jobs. I put the bowling ball in the closet, eventually taking it to a bowling alley, smoke-filled with the hint of beer aroma, the ownership accepting my donation to the alley's rack. I have never missed bowling since that move.

I joined a good-sized social running club in my new town. The club met on Wednesday nights, running the same five-mile route after work, in the summer daylight and the winter darkness, the first mile beginning in the regional public park, up into the apartments and condominiums, before running the sidewalks along the busy thoroughfares that made the remainder of the route's square progression. The

club always repaired to the pizza parlor across from the park, for pizza and beer, no cigarettes.

On those weeknight runs, I pushed my pace, keeping up with the leaders, I tracked my progress. I was young enough, fast enough, and sufficiently determined, clinging onto the faster club members. Every Wednesday night, despite rain, cold wind, freezing temperatures, heat, or overheated wind, I showed up, ran hard, expecting to be quicker every time. For the faster runners in the club, those runs were easy tempo style runs. For me, those runs were a race for one, no reservation needed.

On Saturdays, I ran my long runs with a smaller group, a faster subset of the club. We were all the age to hammer till we dropped on each of those runs. We'd run the local trails above the towns in which we lived. Or, we'd travel to an adjacent town in the region, assessing our collective mettle on the other long routes that we'd come to know. One of our favorite routes was across the bay on trails in an oversized regional reservoir park.

These long runs on the soft surfaces within the park were true progression runs for younger runners of a certain age, like us. We'd use the quiet lane in the small town where we parked to loosen up over that first mile into the park. Then it was Katie bar the door on the single-track loop around the first lake, leading into Ben break down the door over to and around the double-track loop around the reservoir itself, followed by the flat out peddle to the medal final loop and dash back to the parked cars.

These runs were before smart watches. We knew that a 2-hour run in that park, with the ups and down amidst the oak trees, and the long, winding paths beneath the evergreens was a distance of 17-21 miles. We knew the checkpoints by memory: the tight loop around the first lake; the dirt connector road past or over the ever present mud puddle or pond to the much longer reservoir loop; the medium mileage on the dirt path back to the park's entrance. We also knew we would enjoy the post-run brunch in the small breakfast café on the square where we parked.

Each and every time we ran out at the reservoir, I expected fast splits leading to a faster overall run time. Always starting the run at the same lamp post, pressing the lap split button on my Casio running watch at the beginning and end of the first lake trail loop, the same to the reservoir, and again to the finish. The long finishing section

of the run was always a blur in a collection of legs, varied shirts and shoes, always fast in the making. I'd track the splits and the overall result each time we went out to the reservoir, ignoring the obvious fact that I was just fast enough to hang with the faster of the group.

Then I married, moved away, raised a child, earning a lifetime career in which I was merely good enough to improve but not overly impress anyone, much like my running. I joined another running club that has since shrunk to only a handful. We now attend and play trivia on Wednesday nights, running long together on Saturday mornings. Applied to me, I show up for the start of those runs, joining in the brunch afterwards. Because I have slowed so dramatically in the last couple of years, I now run those long runs alone.

In this running age accompanied by smart watches noting every mile, every heartbeat, every split, and the mood, I run alone knowing how slow I am running. I see my tribe at the start, before they fade into the distance, running ahead of my arrival to the same checkpoints on the course we've chosen. If I'm having a decent morning, I am fortunate to "catch" up to them at a restroom or water stop. If my run is typical for me these days, I'll have my thoughts keeping me company to when I finish, where the rest have already cooled down, changed, and were headed to brunch. They always save me a place at the table.

Just as with every other endeavor, I fully expect to have a faster result than the time before. I see the practice that I put into the training. I know these routes from a faster period of time just a couple of years ago. I feel the same desire to succeed, wanting similar results equating to those of my immediate past. Instead, I repeat the same result of every run I have, complete with shoes striking one another from lateral heel whip, knees knocking and calves rubbing, despite constant and focused physical therapy. And a slowness that I cannot explain to myself.

Still, today I will run, knowing all of my failures and foibles with running. In my mind, I know I can run a pace for the distance chosen by me. I also know that within steps into run I will be focused on not tripping myself, keeping my legs from invading each other's running space, knowing I am slow. There is little room for focused pace when the physical issues pervade all of my effort. I have expectations that only I can meet. And, I have no limits on those expectations. Well, except reality.